
WEST: Multiplying Errors to Itself

Peter Nicholson and Charles Soper

The Apostasy of Essentially Evangelical Nonconformity

E. J. Poole-Connor's masterly book *The Apostasy of English Non-Conformity* continues to be of great significance today. Published at a time when the membership of England's Nonconformist churches still constituted the conscience of the nation, it exposed the tragic extent to which denominations once founded firmly on the truth of the Bible had been commandeered by unbelief. Quoting the proud boast made by the modernist Baptist Union leader Reaveley Glover that "To-day, if you want a real old obscurantist college, you have to found a new one",¹ Poole-Connor identified the leaven that had leavened the lump as an abandonment of the concept of Christian doctrine as a fixed body of truth: "their position is not greatly removed from that of those who regard Christian doctrine, not as 'the truth once for all delivered to the saints', but as a body of tentative conclusions which, like the deductions of scientists, are liable to frequent correction, or even, in process of time, to complete reversal".² Devoting a chapter to C. H. Spurgeon's courageous but lonely stand for the truth during the Down-Grade controversy, he moved to a discussion of a recently published commentary on the Bible edited by the Primitive Methodist scholar A. S. Peake. The contributors to this volume were holders of theological degrees and doctorates which the numerous Free Church colleges still operating at the time had begun to covet. Poole-Connor compiled the following series of quotations from the commentary:

"(Exodus) at best enshrines some kernel of fact that would have been lost, but for its protective husk of unconsciously imaginative form." "Even the most plausible details (in the Book of Numbers) can only pass as history in the absence of anything more trustworthy." "What proportion, if any, of the narrative (in certain chapters) is fact, it is impossible to say." "(Joshua) appears to be a medley of contradictory narratives, most of which are unhistorical. It has to be admitted that the writers knew nothing of history in the modern sense of the term; myth, legend, tradition, were all accepted without question. A simple historical fact (Jericho) has been altered out of all recognition. The author stated that what he thought ought to have occurred (Cities of Refuge) did, as a fact, actually occur." Judges contains incidents which, "not historically probable", are "genuine folk-tales". The Books of

¹ Poole-Connor, *Apostasy*, p. 64.

² Poole-Connor, *Apostasy*, p. 17. Readers are asked to note and remember in particular the word "tentative".

Samuel contain portions in which the author “forgot that he was composing a speech for Samuel”; others which “illustrate the imperfect morality ascribed to Yahweh”. In Chronicles i. and ii. the writers “felt justified in modifying the narratives for their own purpose”; in other portions “the bias is so evident, the exaggeration so glaring ... that they are the least valuable portions of the Old Testament for spiritual purposes.” In Ezra “it is the fatal intrusion of the Chronicler’s own ideas which have been so harmful to history.” “There are no Psalms which are even probably Davidic.”³

This last comment is reflected today in the thought of the Senior Lecturer in New Testament at Wales Evangelical School of Theology, Cornelis Bennema, who has left on record his opinion that Psalm 51 is “post-exilic”.⁴ We hope it is clear that if post-exilic, then not Davidic.⁵ Bennema continues in the same vein by treating the Books both of Job and Proverbs as being exilic or post-exilic in origin,⁶ as well as commending and promoting a study which claims that the author of 1 and 2 Chronicles reformulated and rewrote Israel’s history to meet the needs of the Jewish post-exilic community, with his portrayal of the Judahite kings “driven by his cult-retribution ideology”.⁷ Bennema also

³ Poole-Connor, *Apostasy*, pp. 39-40.

⁴ Bennema, “Strands of Wisdom”, p. 65.

⁵ It is imperative to note here our Lord’s reference – recorded in three places in Scripture (Matthew 22.43-45, Mark 12.36-37, Luke 20.42-44) – to David as the author of Psalm 110. Peter does the same in Acts 2.34. Similar instances are found in Acts 1.16-20 (cf. Psalms 69 and 109), Acts 2.25-28 (Psalm 16), Romans 4.6-8 (Psalm 32) and Romans 11.9-10 (Psalm 69). In all these cases the New Testament identifies David as the author of Psalms which in the Book of Psalms itself are specifically ascribed to David.

It should also be noted carefully that it is the *verse numbers* of the Psalms which are not inspired, having been added at a vastly later date. Translations of the Bible into Polish have numbered the verses of Psalms starting from the superscription since the [Calvinist Brest Bible](#) of 1563 (Kossowska, *Biblia*, pp. 245, 28, 19-21), in the case of Psalm 51 making the superscription into two verses. Only devastation could result from Poland’s Bible-believing Christians accepting the logic of WEST’s Senior Lecturer that while verses 3-21 of Psalm 51 in their Bibles may in some sense be inspired, verses 1 and 2 are erroneous.

It is also not irrelevant to note here a statement once made by no less a figure than Brian Edwards, the prominent critic of what he and the current Principal of WEST have together dubbed “[hyper-separatism](#)”, who in tracing the historical rise of what he called “higher criticism” complained that “David was robbed of most of the Psalms, at least two Isaiahs wrote Isaiah, and all prophecy was given a late date to avoid the embarrassment to the unbelieving critic of fulfilled prophecy” (Edwards, *Nothing but the Truth*, p. 7). With the addition of David being robbed of the Psalms, all three of these errors are now being taught at WEST (for two and even three Isaiahs, two Zechariahs etc., see [here](#) and [here](#); if not *all* prophecy, then at least the Cyrus prophecies of Isaiah 44.28 and 45.1, which are discussed in the same two articles, as is WEST’s “explanation” of Isaiah 7.14 and its adoption of the “Deuteronomistic History”, which involves an implicit rejection of the authenticity of much of the prophecy contained in Deuteronomy to 2 Kings). Is Mr Edwards now afraid to stand up for the truths he once professed, for fear of being labelled with the epithet he himself helped put into circulation?

⁶ Bennema, “Strands of Wisdom”, p. 65.

⁷ “Thus the reality of the Jewish post-exilic community called for a reformulation of the basis of their cultural/national identity. ... The Chronicler communicates this by a twofold emphasis in his rewrite of Israel’s history. First, the Chronicler’s portrayal of the Judahite kings is driven by his cult-retribution ideology” – Dharamraj and Rotokha, “History”, p. 16. For the commendation of this essay by Bennema and Bhakiaraj as joint editors of the volume concerned see Bennema and Bhakiaraj, “Introduction”, xii. Note also Poole-

thinks that the First Epistle of Peter was “probably written during the reign of Domitian”,⁸ a reign which began at least a decade after the apostle’s death.

However, it is when he comes to his specialist subject of the Fourth Gospel that Bennema most clearly demonstrates his affinity with the essentially evangelical traditions of Peake’s Commentary. As we have written elsewhere,⁹ in the published version of his doctoral dissertation WEST’s Johannine expert expressed the opinion that the Fourth Gospel is partially fiction:

Whether it is necessary (in order to accept the truth claim of John 3) that Nicodemus existed, or whether it is necessary that his conversation with Jesus took place exactly as has been recorded is perhaps more ambivalent. Nevertheless, even if historical facts cannot be reconstructed any more, we still require a kind of narrative plausibility: for example, we prefer to see some historical reality behind the Nicodemus story, in that it must be plausible that such a conversation could have taken place. In our understanding, the Fourth Gospel moves along a spectrum of a mixture of (what we would call) ‘history’ and ‘fiction’, in which the stories about Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, for example, perhaps contain more fiction than the passion narrative in John 18-19 [p. 16]. ... it does not necessarily need to be historically accurate in all its detail; it may be a mixture of historical accuracy and fictional imagination in its witness to the T/truth. This is not to deny a historical substratum to the Fourth Gospel, but the question of how much is historical need not dominate the debate concerning to what extent the Fourth Gospel is true [p. 106].¹⁰

WEST’s Johannine Expert: the author of the Fourth Gospel fictionalised, embellished, left out, changed or added details

If this were a question of a single sentence in an unpublished doctoral dissertation, we might be open to persuasion that WEST’s Johannine expert later changed his mind, dare we say repented. But as well as going on to publish his dissertation, he has later made similar assertions in several other publications:

Connor’s quotation, given above, from the commentary edited by Peake – “felt justified in modifying the narratives for their own purpose”.

⁸ Bennema, “Early Christian Identity”, p. 65.

⁹ Nicholson, *WEST’s Johannine Expert*; Nicholson, “WEST: The Fourth Gospel”.

¹⁰ Bennema, *The Power*, pp. 16, 106. These pages may be accessed at: <http://www.strateias.org/fiction.pdf>.

Whether it is necessary (in order to accept the truth claim of John 3) that Nicodemus existed, or whether it is necessary that his conversation with Jesus took place exactly as has been recorded, is perhaps a more ambivalent issue. Nevertheless, I suggest that there is a need for a historical anchor – the existence of Jesus, the crucifixion and resurrection are necessary historical facts for theological truth. Even if many historical facts cannot be precisely reconstructed any more, there still needs to be historical plausibility. For example, it is essential to have some historical reality behind the Nicodemus story, in that it must be historically plausible that such a conversation between Jesus and a Jewish religious leader could have taken place. Since there is ample evidence that Jesus had heated debates with the Jewish religious authorities, I contend that Nicodemus was a historical person who actually had a conversation with Jesus.¹¹

John may have ‘fictionalized’ or embellished aspects of his characters by leaving out, changing or adding certain details from his sources – as historians and biographers often do. For example, John (the Baptist) appears in this gospel as an eloquent witness to Jesus while the Synoptics present him as a rough-hewn figure preaching a baptism of repentance. Was the so-called Beloved Disciple as perfect as this gospel portrays him or has he been somewhat ‘idealized’? If the Gospels belong to the genre of ancient Graeco-Roman biography (as many scholars contend today), they need not necessarily be historically accurate in every detail. The authors may have used literary ‘creativity’ ...¹²

He does not mention that there is a growing scholarly consensus (rooted in Richard Burridge’s work) that the Gospels are *ancient* biographies, where persuasion and plausibility were more important than “factual accuracy” and where the line between what we would call “fact” and “fiction” is somewhat blurred.¹³

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¹¹ Bennema, *Excavating*, p. 8.

¹² Bennema, *Encountering*, p. 13.

¹³ Bennema, *Review of New Testament History*, p. 4 of the pdf.

explain, while not everything in non-fiction narratives is necessarily historical, this does not make them fictional narratives since they do claim to describe the real world ...¹⁴

We are not surprised to see that another contributor¹⁵ to the same volume agrees:

At the same time, we are also dealing in the Gospels with non-fictional narrative, whatever we make of the Gospels' relationship to history (which will depend, in part, on our understanding of their literary genre) [p. 199]. ... Despite these difficulties, the characteristics of the two women are, as we have seen, consistent between the two Gospels. It may be that John is aware of Luke's account and has drawn his characterization from Luke, as is often suggested. It is also possible that this consistency of characterization is grounded in historical tradition rather than being a literary fabrication of one or other of the evangelists. It is true that realistic characterization need not imply historical authenticity; it may just as well be the product of narrative creativity [p. 210].¹⁶

WEST's Johannine specialist constantly evaluates the Fourth Gospel in the light of modern fiction

A fundamental failure in Bennema's approach to the Fourth Gospel is that he treats it as human literature. Furthermore, in explaining his rationale he constantly makes reference to the need for study of the Fourth Gospel to be informed by insights derived from the study of modern fiction:

We must provide a rationale for looking at ancient Hebrew and Greek literature as well as modern fiction for a theory of character in the Fourth Gospel. ... the Fourth Evangelist might also have had a good understanding of characterization in Graeco-Roman literature [p. 3].¹⁷ ... We are now in a position to address the issue of whether modern methods of fiction can be applied to ancient biblical narratives. We contend that we can apply both modern methods to ancient narratives and methods of fiction to non-fictional narratives ... It would then be legitimate to apply insights from modern

¹⁴ Bennema, "A Comprehensive Approach", p. 45.

¹⁵ Dorothy A. Lee, Frank Woods Professor of New Testament and Dean of Trinity College Theological School, MCD University of Divinity in Melbourne, Australia.

¹⁶ Lee, "Martha and Mary", pp. 199, 210-211. We deliberately do not provide detailed comment on most of these quotations, leaving readers to make their own judgment on the passages cited. The quotations are extensive, in line with a request made by the editor of the *Evangelical Times* for "proven allegations", "direct evidence" and "hard facts" (Fay, "Editor's note"). It should be noted here that the author cited here first refers to the Gospel of John as "non-fictional narrative", and then goes on to say that "realistic characterization need not imply historical authenticity".

¹⁷ We think he was a Galilean fisherman. We also think that, as a Christian, he did not go to the theatre. See below for the discussion of authorship.

fiction to ancient literature [p. 12]. ... Having examined aspects of character in ancient and modern literature, we must now turn to the Fourth Gospel and consider which aspects apply (and how) in order to develop a coherent and comprehensive theory of character for the Fourth Gospel. This is legitimate since we have concluded that we can apply insights from modern fiction to non-fictional ancient narratives such as the Fourth Gospel ... [p. 13]¹⁸

I will draw on my earlier work to show that while there are differences in characterization in the Hebrew Bible, ancient Greek literature and modern fiction, these are differences in emphases rather than kind [p. 38]. ... I contend that there is reasonable evidence that character in ancient Hebrew and Greek literature could be complex, change and even show personality ... It would then be legitimate to use insights from modern fiction to study character in ancient literature. I maintain that we can apply aspects from modern literary methods to study character in ancient narratives [p. 40] ... Robert Tannehill likewise defends the use of insights from modern fiction to ancient biblical narratives: [quoting from Tannehill:] “[T]here are qualities which all narratives share and further qualities which various narratives may share, even when some make use of historical fact, if the author has a strong, creative role. Because of the importance of the novel in modern literature, qualities of narrative are often discussed in terms of the novel. With proper caution the biblical scholar can learn from this discussion.” [p. 41] ... Underlying my theory of character is the belief that ... we can use modern literary methods to analyse character in ancient narratives [p. 57].¹⁹

WEST’s Johannine Expert on the flexible Johannine literary creativity

What does Bennema mean when he says that the author of the Fourth Gospel fictionalised, embellished, left out, changed or added details? What is this literary creativity, and how did it operate – not in the “ancient world”, but in the work of an *inspired biblical author* – with the line between fact and fiction being apparently somewhat blurred? Does WEST’s Senior Lecturer in New Testament give any examples of these practices?

“John”, he declares, “is a skilled storyteller”,²⁰ adding later in the same book that “John, at times, is flexible with his chronology”.²¹ However, Bennema would have us believe that the author of the Fourth Gospel was also flexible with other, perhaps more significant details:

¹⁸ Bennema, “A Theory of Character”, pp. 3, 12, 13 of the pdf.

¹⁹ Bennema, “A Comprehensive Approach”, pp. 38, 40, 41, 57.

²⁰ Bennema, *Excavating*, p. 58.

The miraculous catch of fish (21:1-14) ... takes place at the Sea of Tiberias or Sea of Galilee (v. 1). Why at the Sea of Galilee? First, this story may coincide with an early Christian tradition, found in Matthew 28:10, 16-20 ... Second, the only other mention of Jesus' being at the Sea of Galilee is in 6:1, therefore the miraculous catch of fish in John 21 could be understood against the background of Jesus' having miraculously provided food for the multitude in 6:1-15.²²

It would seem we are to understand that the inspired author changed a detail here, and that the miraculous catch of fish actually took place at another location. Can it really be the case that the reason why this miracle is presented as having taken place at the Sea of Galilee is because this coincided with "an early Christian tradition" (found in the Gospel of Matthew), or also perhaps because making it happen at this location was a literary device allowing the writer to set up a convenient point of comparison?

Bennema claims that the skilled storyteller of the Fourth Gospel used a whole series of advanced literary techniques, "such as irony, misunderstanding, metaphor, symbolism, dualism, characterization and double entendre".²³ The problem here is not the fact that some of the characters in the Fourth Gospel may have spoken words in irony or misunderstood other characters, but that the implication is that as with the case of the site of the miraculous catch of fish the inspired author changed or added details to suit his purpose, making his characters use irony or misunderstand something, in order to achieve a literary effect:

Characterization refers to the description and development of characters, and John uses this technique ...²⁴ In verses 20-21, John uses the literary tool of misunderstanding ... John frequently uses the misunderstanding of characters in the story to provide subsequent explanation ...²⁵

We have already noted Bennema's opinion that there are elements of fiction in the account of the Saviour's meeting with Nicodemus. We note, too, that having said the author of this Gospel used misunderstanding as a literary tool or technique he goes on to say, very significantly, that

²¹ Bennema, *Excavating*, p. 216.

²² Bennema, *Excavating*, p. 223-224.

²³ Bennema, *Excavating*, p. 11.

²⁴ Bennema, *Excavating*, p. 12.

²⁵ Bennema, *Excavating*, p. 41.

“Nicodemus misunderstands Jesus”.²⁶ We certainly agree that Nicodemus misunderstood the Saviour, but the implication in Bennema’s approach is that the author set up elements of this situation as if he were writing a novel. We are left with the impression that in casting the character of Nicodemus the author made Nicodemus misunderstand, to set up a situation in which the Saviour could make a statement about being born of water and the Spirit: “In order to clarify Nicodemus’ misunderstanding, Jesus explains that a person needs to be born of water and the Spirit ”.²⁷

This impression is strengthened by statements such as these:

John’s use of the plurals ‘we’ and ‘you’ in verse 2 and again, verses 11-12, probably indicates that, in the story world, Nicodemus came with his disciples to have a public discussion in the evening with Jesus and his disciples, rather than a scenario in which Nicodemus secretly meet [sic] Jesus in the night. In the world of the reader, however, this incident typifies those who are attracted to Jesus, but are still in the dark ...²⁸

Scholars frequently give the impression that Nicodemus came to Jesus alone, secretly at night ... A more likely scenario, however, is that Nicodemus, accompanied by his disciples, came one evening to have a discussion with Jesus and his disciples ... Hence, at the level of story, Nicodemus may speak for himself and his disciples, while at the level of narrative, John casts him as the representative of a larger group with the same faith-stance.²⁹

The Gospel of John makes no mention of Nicodemus being accompanied by his disciples. So we feel justified in asking: did the author leave out this detail, or is it Bennema who has added it? We have no objections to a discussion of Nicodemus’ motives for making that visit – different answers have been proposed. But we would like to draw attention to the use of the contrasting pairs of technical terms used by narrative and reader-response critics: “story world”/“the world of the reader” and “the level of story”/“the level of narrative”. Is the account presented in John 3 one in which details such as the presence of Nicodemus’ disciples are deliberately left out, manipulating the scenario to create one which was significantly different from the historical one (if Nicodemus was accompanied by a group of disciples, the conversation was not the semi-private one of which we read in John 3),

²⁶ Bennema, *Excavating*, p. 45.

²⁷ Bennema, *Excavating*, p. 45.

²⁸ Bennema, *Excavating*, p. 47.

²⁹ Bennema, *Encountering*, p. 79.

and in which the reaction of Nicodemus is also manipulated to allow the author to put words into the mouth of the Saviour – words which perhaps He never actually said?

In this respect, the following paragraph is quite astounding:

If we recognize John's allusions to the Jewish wisdom literature, particularly the apocryphal book Wisdom of Solomon, we may probe further *how* this understanding of the cross and the consequent spiritual birth will come about. First, as Wisdom shows Jacob [sic] the kingdom of God (Wisdom of Solomon 10:10), so Jesus shows Nicodemus the way to the kingdom of God in verses 3 and 5. Second, John 3:12 finds a parallel in Wisdom of Solomon 9:16: if 'earthly things' are already difficult to understand, how much more 'heavenly things'? Wisdom of Solomon 9:17-18 goes on to explain that Solomon will only be able to understand the 'heavenly things', and hence experience salvation, if God sends Wisdom and the accompanying Spirit.³⁰

Notice here the words "*John's allusions*". Nicodemus did not know about the need for a new birth, and we understand from the Saviour's reaction that Nicodemus should have known, based on his knowledge of the scriptures of which he was a teacher. It is an extremely useful – and indeed essential – exercise for all preachers of the Gospel to identify passages in the Old Testament which in this respect should have been known to and understood by Nicodemus. The Lord did not Himself say at this point what those passages are. However, according to Bennema, the author of John 3 has put words into the mouth of the Saviour ("*John's allusions*"), making Him base His teaching here on words from the apocryphal book Wisdom of Solomon. Is it not debased practice to prefer bramble to the vine, fig or cedar?³¹

Putting words into the mouths of characters in the Gospels is nothing new to WEST. As has been shown in a previous article,³² doctoral research carried out by Polish student Sebastian Smolarz reached precisely the same conclusion regarding the words of John the Baptist recorded in John 3.29. The article also notes WEST's liberal use of the Q document hypothesis, despite its origin with and primary employment by detractors of Scripture. The research was supervised by WEST's Director of

³⁰ Bennema, *Excavating*, p. 48.

³¹ The words of the Saviour spoken to Nicodemus retain all their original solemnity as they address WEST's Johannine expert: "Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?"

³² Nicholson and Soper, *WEST: Still Not Coming Clean*.

Biblical Studies Tom Holland, its published version carrying a warm commendation from Dr Holland as “a fine, extensive and detailed study”.³³

We end this section with an extended quotation from another study published by Bennema, which discusses the words of John the Baptist reported in John 1.33:

Although the phrase ὁ ο(βαπτίζων bapti/zwn ἐν ε)η πνεύματι pneu/mati ἁγίῳ is a *hapax legomenon* [sic] in Johannine literature, we expect that the *concept* will be evoked and unfolded in the rest of the Fourth Gospel. In this paper, I will attempt to demonstrate that the statement in 1,33 concerning Jesus’ baptizing in or with Holy Spirit is programmatic for Jesus’ ministry of revelation and cleansing by means of the Spirit. ... Either the Evangelist used material from a (written or oral) tradition he had access to without making any changes to it, or he interpreted it somehow. If the Evangelist used the Baptist tradition and was able to reinterpret the Baptist’s ministry rather radically — its purpose being to reveal the identity of the Messiah to Israel (1,31) — then the Evangelist could equally also have reinterpreted the Baptist’s prophecy concerning Jesus’ baptizing in/with the Holy Spirit and unfolded it in the rest of the Gospel using other images ... We will first suggest why the Fourth Evangelist omitted the “and fire” from the original Q-saying. A possible reason for this omission is because according to the Fourth Gospel Jesus did not visibly introduce a judgement of fire as the Baptist anticipated. Judgement in the Fourth Gospel is not depicted in apocalyptic end-of-the-world language, nor does John portray Jesus as bringing judgement in an active way (3,17; 8,15). Jesus is depicted as the locus of God’s revelation and salvation, and there is judgement for those who reject the revelation Jesus brings, i.e., judgement is dependent on one’s attitude towards the Spirit-Baptizer (3,17-21.36; 5,24; 9,1-41; 12,47-48). ... Hence, both John and the Synoptics have a similar understanding of the Baptist’s prophecy “to baptize with Holy Spirit(-and-fire)”, in that Spirit-baptism has the purpose of cleansing and effects salvation or judgement. A possible explanation for this resemblance may be that the Fourth Evangelist knew (part of) Q or the Synoptic tradition, and utilized or shared the same Baptist tradition as the Synoptics but shaped it according to his own theological concerns/purposes. Even those who challenge John’s dependence on the Synoptics still explain the contacts between John and the Synoptics in terms of contacts between the *sources* of the Synoptic writers and those available to the Fourth Evangelist, rather than between the Gospels themselves.³⁴

³³ An image of the back cover of the book carrying Dr Holland’s commendation may be accessed [here](#). The continued support being given to Dr Smolarz by [Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Cardiff](#) sustains a destructive assault on the Bible’s authority in Poland.

³⁴ Bennema, “Spirit-Baptism”, pp. 35-36, 58-59.

According to Bennema, in adopting John the Baptist's words from an earlier tradition the author of the Fourth Gospel either used material without making any changes or interpreted it somehow, perhaps even radically. Among several serious implications arising from the above passage we would like to direct readers' particular attention to just one: by making the Fourth Evangelist draw his source from a written or oral tradition to which he had access (the sources available to the Fourth Evangelist or those available to the Synoptic writers, and in particular even the so-called Q document), Bennema implies that the Fourth Evangelist had no immediate contact with the authentic statement on which to base his account – "the Fourth Evangelist knew (part of) Q"; "the *original* Q-saying" [emphasis added].³⁵

WEST's Johannine expert: External sources are needed to establish historicity

A further feature of Bennema's method is that external sources need to be taken into account when evaluating the characters present in the Fourth Gospel:

With regard to John's Gospel, the author primarily employs indirect characterization, so we must infer character from the character's speech and actions, and what other characters say about that character, rather than the narrator's speech. On the other hand, since John's Gospel claims to be a non-fictional narrative and therefore refers to events and people in the real world, we must fill the gaps from our knowledge of the socio-historical context of the first-century Mediterranean world (rather than our own imagination). Narrative critics tend to limit themselves to the text, but I shall demonstrate the need to go occasionally *beyond* the text for the reconstruction of character. ... This demands that we also look outside John's Gospel at other sources that can assist us in reconstructing the Johannine characters. The historical data available to us from other (literary and non-literary) sources should supplement the data that the text provides about a character.³⁶

³⁵ While the present article discusses the question of authorship in a later section, we note here that some commentators state very clearly their opinion that the author of the Fourth Gospel is the second, unnamed disciple mentioned in John 1.35. It is characteristic of John that throughout his Gospel he chooses not to refer to himself by name. This even extends to his not naming his mother in John 19.25, where he refers to her as the sister of Mary the mother of Jesus, and who is identified as the mother of Zebedee's children in Matthew 27.56 and as Salome in Mark 15.40. Similarly, Matthew does not name himself as the owner of the house in Matthew 9.10, and Mark does not name himself as the one who left his linen cloth in Mark 14.52. William Hendriksen points out that, as an eyewitness, the author of the Fourth Gospel remembers the day and even the exact hour when the events described occurred, citing among his examples John 1.29, 35 and 39 – Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John*, vol. I, p. 18.

³⁶ Bennema, "A Comprehensive Approach", p. 43.

As for the character of Pilate, it is imperative that we examine the works of Josephus and Philo since many scholars contend that these sources portray Pilate differently than the Fourth Gospel. ... In other words, we should reconstruct the Johannine characters from the information that the text of the Fourth Gospel provides *and* supplement it with relevant information from other sources.³⁷

As for the character of Pilate, we must examine the works of Josephus and Philo since many scholars contend that these sources portray Pilate differently from John's Gospel. Besides, we should also look at the Synoptic portrayal of Pilate, especially since a good case can be made that the Johannine author knew Mark's Gospel.³⁸

While Bennema makes the bold claim that his approach means he will "arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the Johannine Pilate",³⁹ supporters of WEST should note that this is based on the assumption that it is where writers such as Josephus and Philo *differ* from the biblical record that the information they provide is necessary for his understanding to be complete.

In the case of Pilate, it turns out that "[t]he Johannine portrait of Pilate does not differ greatly from those of Josephus and Philo",⁴⁰ but that "[w]e find a partially different story when we turn to the Synoptic Gospels."⁴¹ This leads to an ominous conclusion: "[a]ssuming the priority of Mark's Gospel, it is interesting that while Matthew and Luke altered or deviated from Mark, the Johannine author (who, in my view, also knew Mark), significantly expands on Mark's account and essentially agrees with his characterization of Pilate."⁴² This means we can be sure Matthew and Luke have altered or deviated from Mark because Mark and John are confirmed by the historically reliable Josephus and Philo. What *is* the wheat to the chaff?

Another of Bennema's fellow-contributors⁴³ writes:

While we can, indeed, access accurate historical information from the Gospel, and while we can trust that there is no deliberate intent to mislead on the part of the author or his informants, we have no

³⁷ Bennema, "A Theory of Character", pp. 14-15 of the pdf.

³⁸ Bennema, "A Comprehensive Approach", p. 44.

³⁹ Bennema, "The Character of Pilate", p. 241.

⁴⁰ Bennema, "The Character of Pilate", p. 250.

⁴¹ Bennema, "The Character of Pilate", p. 250.

⁴² Bennema, "The Character of Pilate", p. 251.

⁴³ Judith Christine Single Redman, a minister in the Uniting Church of Australia.

reliable way of separating what is accurate from what is just consistent with what really happened or from what helps the author or his informants to make sense of the world in which they were living, unless it is corroborated by external evidence. While people of faith will continue to accept it as truth, the research to date brings us no closer to being able to demonstrate that it is the whole truth and nothing but the truth, much though some Christians would like to be able to do so.⁴⁴

This remarkable statement about “the research to date” is entirely predicated on the unstated and wholly unscholarly assumption that Scripture’s record is inaccurate de facto. This is not the writing of an objective historian, it is sharply partisan from the outset.

WEST’s Johannine expert: the character named by Papias as John the Presbyter is a serious contender for the identity of the disciple who leaned on the Lord’s bosom at the Last Supper

We now come to the question of authorship of the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine literature in general. The conventional view is that the Fourth Gospel was written by one of the Twelve, John the son of Zebedee, who refers to himself in the Gospel as the disciple whom Jesus loved. Cornelis Bennema is not at all sure of this. Here he states clearly that whoever the author was, it was not the Beloved Disciple:

The identity of the Beloved Disciple is much debated. Many have suggested it is John, the son of Zebedee and possibly the author; others argue that the Beloved Disciple is an idealized character who exemplifies the model disciple. I contend that the Beloved Disciple is a real historical character, one of the Twelve, but not the author. It is possible that the author has ‘idealized’ this person to function as an example of the ideal witness/disciple ...⁴⁵

His lack of certainty here later led him to express the opposite opinion: “the gospel thus identifies the Beloved Disciple as its reliable eyewitness and author (21:24-25).”⁴⁶ Viewed alongside a statement

⁴⁴ Redman, “Eyewitness Testimony”, p. 77. On page 63 of the same essay, Redman states that “Gospels are non-fiction”. Readers should be aware of the significance of the term ‘non-fiction’ as used by the practitioners of narrative criticism (see several examples of its use by Bennema quoted throughout the present article, and also of its use by his co-contributors – here and in footnote 16). Whenever they affirm the Gospels to be non-fiction, they go on to express their conviction that the Gospels cannot however be considered to be the truth and nothing but the truth.

⁴⁵ Bennema, *Excavating*, p. 145.

⁴⁶ Bennema, *Encountering*, p. 176.

made at the beginning of the same book, that “We contend that the author of this gospel is the Beloved Disciple, whom we tentatively identify as John the son of Zebedee”,⁴⁷ this would represent a change for the better, if it were not for the word “tentatively”.⁴⁸

The problem here is the question of the identity of the disciple whom Jesus loved. Many scholars now identify this disciple with the person of John the Presbyter, who is also known as John the Elder. John the Elder is not referred to by name in the Fourth Gospel, but is listed in the short remaining fragments of the second-century writer Papias of Hierapolis.⁴⁹ Bennema sums up a discussion of the identity of the Beloved Disciple with these words:

What then shall we conclude? First, we must realise that this gospel primarily emphasizes the *function* of the Beloved Disciple within the Johannine narrative (as the reliable eyewitness to Jesus) rather than his identity. ... Second, we suggest that the external evidence allows for the possibility that the Beloved Disciple is either John the son of Zebedee or John the Elder, but that the internal evidence favours an identification with the former. ... The identity of the Beloved Disciple remains a debatable (and perhaps irresolvable) issue. Although we tentatively propose that John of Zebedee is the most likely candidate, John the Elder is a serious contender.⁵⁰

Readers should consider carefully Bennema’s identification of John the son of Zebedee as the Beloved Disciple (and hence as the author of the Fourth Gospel), not only in the light of the fact that this identification is only tentative, but in view of the alternative proposed as a *serious contender* – John the Elder. The implications of adopting this alternative identification are so far-reaching that no Bible-believing Christian can possibly entertain it as a serious option. This identification would not only indicate that John the Elder was the author of the Fourth Gospel. If John the Elder was the disciple whom Jesus loved, this would mean that it was John the Elder who went fishing with several other disciples after the Resurrection (John 21.7). Identifying the Beloved Disciple as John the Presbyter would also mean that it was John the Presbyter who was present at the crucifixion and was

⁴⁷ Bennema, *Encountering*, p. 1.

⁴⁸ We return to the words of E. J. Poole-Connor quoted at the beginning of the present article: “their position is not greatly removed from that of those who regard Christian doctrine, not as ‘the truth once for all delivered to the saints’, but as a body of tentative conclusions which, like the deductions of scientists, are liable to frequent correction, or even, in process of time, to complete reversal” (Poole-Connor, *Apostasy*, p. 17).

⁴⁹ In fact, no copies of Papias’ original writings survive; all that remains are fragments of his work cited by other writers, the earliest being found in Eusebius of Caesarea. See:

<http://hypotyposeis.org/synoptic-problem/2004/10/external-evidence-papias.html>, <http://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.iii.viii.xxxix.html>.

⁵⁰ Bennema, *Encountering*, p. 180-181.

charged with caring for Mary (John 19.26), as well as outrunning Peter to the empty tomb (John 20.2-4). A difficulty of far greater magnitude is found in the presence of the disciple whom Jesus loved at the Last Supper (John 13.23). Matthew, Mark and Luke all say that the Saviour ate this meal with the Twelve (Matthew 26.20, Mark 14.17, Luke 22.14). Is it really a serious possibility that John the Presbyter was there too? Were Matthew, Mark and Luke also guilty of chopping and changing the story and fictionalising and embellishing details to suit their narrative purpose?⁵¹ Bearing in mind several statements already quoted from Bennema's published work, and in particular his acceptance of the findings of source-criticism concerning the so-called Q source,⁵² it is clear that his views on the origins of the four Gospels and on biblical inspiration in general are radically at variance with views on the subject held at WEST prior to the arrival of its former Principal. This makes WEST's profession that these Gospels are "the inspired, infallible and inerrant word of God"⁵³ look like hollow dissimulation.

Bennema also identifies the disciple whom Jesus loved with the other disciple of John 1.35-40⁵⁴ and also the other disciple of John 18.15,⁵⁵ claiming that this creates a problem for identifying the Beloved Disciple as John the son of Zebedee: "The difficulty, however, would be to explain how a Galilean fisherman is familiar with the high priest and has an extensive knowledge of Jerusalem."⁵⁶ This situation did not create a difficulty for a conservative commentator such as William Hendriksen,

⁵¹ Only seven candidates for the Beloved Disciple are presented to us with the Lord in John 21:2: Simon Peter, Thomas called Didymus, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee and two other of his disciples. Unlike all the Synoptics and Acts, the author of the Fourth Gospel does not name either John or James the sons of Zebedee at all, only mentioning their relation to their father in this verse. This reminds us of Matthew's newborn modesty in concealing his ownership of the house where the Lord dined after Matthew's conversion (Matthew 9:10, cf. Mark 2:15, Luke 5:29). The Fourth Gospel does however freely name Peter, Philip, Andrew, Thomas, Jude, Judas and Nathanael. Only Peter, James and John joined the Lord at the Transfiguration, went with Him into Jairus' house and were invited to follow Him into Gethsemane (Matthew 17:1, Luke 9:28, Luke 8:51, Mark 5:37, Mark 14:33). Only Peter and John were sent to prepare the Passover (Luke 22:8). Of the twelve who ate with the Lord at the Table (Matthew 26:20, Mark 14:17, Luke 22:14), only one was leaning on the Lord's bosom when Peter asked him to enquire about the betrayer: the disciple whom Jesus loved (John 13:23). Peter and this Beloved Disciple ran together to the empty tomb. It was to this Beloved Disciple, the only one recorded to be at the cross, that as firstborn the Lord even entrusted His mother in preference to her natural, hitherto unbelieving children (John 19:26, John 7:5). Peter and John ministered together in the Temple and faced the Sanhedrin together (Acts 3:3, Acts 4:13,19). It was these two who were chosen to go to Samaria to represent the Apostles (Acts 8:14). James the brother of John died early at Herod's hand (Acts 12:2), thus excluding him from being the one that the disciples later erroneously speculated might live till the Lord returned (John 21:23). The Beloved Disciple is unequivocally the author of the Fourth Gospel (John 21:24). If God be true, and His Word accurate, who else but John the son of Zebedee could the Beloved Disciple be?

⁵² Bennema, "Spirit-Baptism", pp. 57-58.

⁵³ <http://www.webcitation.org/6NGcM6pt0>

⁵⁴ Bennema, *Encountering*, p. 172.

⁵⁵ Bennema, *Encountering*, p. 172.

⁵⁶ Bennema, *Encountering*, p. 180.

who identified the other disciple of John 18.15 as the disciple whom Jesus loved, John the son of Zebedee *and* the author of the Fourth Gospel. Satisfying explanations for this situation do exist, such as John the son of Zebedee being involved in the supply and delivery of fish to Jerusalem, with its village-like scale outside of the festivals, or possible family connections through some of John's in-laws. It should be noted, however, that older commentators such as John Gill, Matthew Henry, Matthew Poole and John Calvin⁵⁷ all point out that the Fourth Gospel does not say that the other disciple of John 18.15 was the disciple whom Jesus loved, and prefer to see the disciple who had access to the high priest's palace as a highly placed Jerusalem Jew, distinct from the Beloved Disciple and the author of the Fourth Gospel.

Bennema's remarks we highlighted earlier to the effect that the Beloved Disciple was perhaps not as perfect as the Fourth Gospel portrays him and he may have been somewhat "idealized" resurface here with worrying effect. Comparing the Beloved Disciple to Thomas, Bennema writes: "both the Beloved Disciple and Thomas have a low degree of characterization ('type'), but the former exhibits near perfect understanding while the latter often misunderstands."⁵⁸ If Bennema admits the Beloved Disciple (whether John the son of Zebedee or John the Elder) is the author of the Fourth Gospel, this would mean that the author idealised himself, presenting himself in a good light in comparison to Thomas and others. Was the divinely inspired author of the Gospel of John really so dishonest and so motivated by vanity?

The uncertainty of WEST's Johannine expert over the identity of the author of the Fourth Gospel extends to problems over the authorship of the remaining Johannine literature:

Although we remain agnostic whether the gospel and the epistles of John have common authorship (an author we call 'John'), the similarities in language, style and theology suggest that they at least belong to the same school of thought.⁵⁹

The Second and Third Epistles of John were written by "the elder". The self-confessed agnosticism of WEST's Johannine expert here and his tentative identification of the author of the Fourth Gospel as John the son of Zebedee means he thinks that if not the Fourth Gospel then at least these two epistles might have been written by John the Elder. Supporters of WEST face a similar problem over

⁵⁷ See the respective commentaries of these five writers *in loco*.

⁵⁸ Bennema, "A Comprehensive Approach", p. 50.

⁵⁹ Bennema, "Christ, the Spirit", p. 108.

the views of the college's Senior Lecturer in New Testament on the authorship of Revelation: "The book of Revelation, perhaps not written by John himself but certainly standing in the same tradition".⁶⁰

Further and very serious issues for WEST's supporters are raised by Bennema's attitude to what he sees as the composite nature of the Fourth Gospel:

[Referring to John 7:53-8:11] The footnote in your English translation of the bible⁶¹ mentions that the oldest Greek manuscripts we have do not contain this passage, so this story is almost certainly a later addition (the first evidence of such addition comes from as late as the fifth century). We may encounter two opposing attitudes: (i) to discard the information regarding the history of the passage; or (ii) to discard the passage because it was not part of the earliest form of the Gospel. Both attitudes are naïve and essentially ignore the possibility of the Gospel being written or edited/composed over a period of time by more than one person. ... we allow the possibility that John's Gospel was not written in one sitting but is the result of various editions, drawn out over a period of time. ... Such an attitude does not compromise a doctrine of divine inspiration or the authority of the bible; but does take into account that the bible – even some of its individual books – was written over a long time by several authors. ... In this case, we took into consideration the fact that this passage was almost certainly a later addition.⁶²

I allow for the possibility that the final form of the Gospel is the work of more than one author or editor, and that certain material may have been edited or added at a later stage. ... The Prologue (1:1-18), for example, may well have been added (either by the original author or someone else) at a later stage; just as 7:53-8:11 was almost certainly not part of the original Gospel. Similarly, John 21 may well have been an addition to an earlier version of the Gospel.⁶³

⁶⁰ Bennema, *Excavating*, p. 61.

⁶¹ It is one thing not to capitalise personal pronouns referring to the Lord Jesus Christ, but Bennema's consistent failure to capitalise the word bible would normally only be accepted by editors and publishers who are atheists or who have a particular interest in demeaning the Christian religion.

⁶² Bennema, *Excavating*, pp. 96, 98.

⁶³ Bennema, *Excavating*, p. 223.

WEST's Johannine expert: John was a binitarian

Bennema's view that the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel is a later addition has further, serious implications. Here is what he says about the Being of God as expressed in this Gospel:

I contend that John (the author) did not primarily see Jesus as one who came to earth with all pre-existent knowledge of God and himself (although we do not deny this possibility), but more as one who was provided with this revelatory knowledge *by the Spirit*. I suggest that it is primarily through the Spirit that Jesus reveals what he has seen and heard from the Father. This would also explain other comments of Jesus, asserting that he only speaks what he hears the Father saying and does what he sees the Father doing (5:19-20; 8:26-28, 38; 14:24; 15:15). On one extreme, we could have the view that, prior to the incarnation, the Son and the Father 'sat around the table' and decided, in detail, everything the Son was about to do during his mission on earth. In contrast, I prefer to believe that during his earthly ministry Jesus was in constant communication with his Father through the Spirit, and received information/guidance regarding what to do and say. In sum, the Spirit functioned as the channel or mode of communication between Jesus and his Father.⁶⁴

The text does not indicate whether Thomas actually touches Jesus (the sight of Jesus may have been sufficient), but his reply certainly expresses the highest confession of Jesus in the entire Gospel: 'My Lord and my God!' (v. 28). Nowhere in the Gospel is Jesus called 'God', except for the Prologue where John identifies the Logos as (being in nature) God (1:1). John's concept of 'God' certainly takes on a binitarian form, in which Jesus, as the Son, is included in the Godhead. Perhaps one could even make a case that John already leans in the direction of a trinitarian belief if we consider: (i) the 'personal' traits of the Spirit-Paraclete; (ii) the Spirit-Paraclete being co-sent by the Father and the Son; (iii) the 'divine' functions of the Spirit-Paraclete as life-giver (6:63) and judge (16:8-11).⁶⁵

Prior to the cross, eternal life and the Spirit were limited to the earthly Jesus, and the Spirit upon Jesus communicated to the disciples the life that was available in him. ... Thus in 19:30, when Jesus hands over the Spirit on the cross, it symbolizes the release of the Spirit, marking the start of the process of the giving of the Spirit. ... One could then raise the question whether the Spirit and the

⁶⁴ Bennema, *Excavating*, p. 52.

⁶⁵ Bennema, *Excavating*, p. 220.

Paraclete are two different entities, but John would object to such a dichotomy. There is only one Spirit-Paraclete ...⁶⁶

[commenting on John 10.30] All this is possible because of the unity between Jesus and the Father – they are one (v.30). We should not understand this last statement of Jesus – ‘I and the Father are one’ – in metaphysical terms (as if God and Jesus are the same person) but in relational terms. That is, the Father and the Son have an intimate relationship and are one in character, purpose, will, work, and so on. ... In verses 37-38, Jesus explains the claim he made in verse 30, that he and the Father are ‘one’, in that the Father is ‘in’ Jesus and vice versa. We should interpret this language of mutual indwelling relationally. It denotes the intimate relationship between God and Jesus, which expresses itself, for example, in Jesus’ doing the work of the Father and the Father’s being at work in Jesus ...⁶⁷

Bennema’s comments on the Saviour’s “I am” sayings pass over the significance of His claim to be the I AM, offering instead such thoughts as the following: “[i]n his depiction of Jesus as the good, caring, reliable shepherd, John may also have had Psalm 23 in mind”.⁶⁸ It is therefore necessary to sound a solemn warning: WEST’s Senior Lecturer in New Testament is on the very brink of denying the Trinity and the full deity of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁶⁹

WEST’s Johannine expert: The Gospel of John contains traces of panentheism

A further point which must be made in the context of Bennema’s appeal to the Jewish wisdom literature which we highlighted in an earlier section concerns a remark he makes at the very end of his published doctoral dissertation:

“Nevertheless, the tendency of the Jewish wisdom tradition to present the Spirit as panentheistic (esp. in Wis. and Philo) is not as much endorsed by the author of the Fourth Gospel as perhaps assumed. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that *traces* [italics in original] of the intertestamental concept of the Spirit as the principle of the physical life can still be found in John.”⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Bennema, *Excavating*, pp. 217, 218.

⁶⁷ Bennema, *Excavating*, pp. 120, 121.

⁶⁸ Bennema, *Excavating*, pp. 116-117.

⁶⁹ “Read those newspapers which represent the Broad School of Dissent, and ask yourself, How much further will they go?” – C. H. Spurgeon, quoted by E. J. Poole Connor in *The Apostasy of English Non-Conformity*, p. 21.

⁷⁰ Bennema, *The Power*, p. 254.

Briefly stated, panentheism is a belief system which holds that the universe is God, differing from pantheism in its view that the universe is not all that is God. According to WEST's Johannine expert, traces of panentheistic thought filtered down from the intertestamental period and persist today in the Gospel of John. How significant are the words "ambiguous" and "entirely", as used by Bennema on the same page:

"In the final evaluation, the Fourth Gospel is ambiguous in depicting the Spirit as the principle of the physical life and in indicating degrees of intensity and quality of Spirit. In the Fourth Gospel, the concept of degrees of intensity and quality of wisdom would be more sustainable, and the concept of the Spirit as facilitator of cognitive perception, understanding and life is manifested most obviously. Hence, a soteriological model in terms of degrees of intensity and quality of Spirit and W/wisdom does not seem entirely sustainable on the basis of the Fourth Gospel".⁷¹

WEST: A Reformed college?

Below we present statements made by WEST's Senior Lecturer in New Testament which cast serious doubt on the college's claim to be promoting Reformed theology:

The Spirit has now become the identity-marker of the true Israel, and the metaphorical birth of the Spirit is now the necessary condition for entering into salvation.⁷²

No one can experience salvation and be a part of God's family except through a birth of the Spirit. This birth of the Spirit occurs when we understand and accept that the cross is God's solution to the problem of sin. What is our response to this revelation of love, to this crucified Jesus? Have we accepted him and experienced this spiritual birth?⁷³

... it is a birth of the Spirit and a confession of faith, based on an adequate understanding of Jesus and the cross, that ultimately qualifies for salvation.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Bennema, *The Power*, p. 254.

⁷² Bennema, *Excavating*, p. 47.

⁷³ Bennema, *Excavating*, pp. 49-50.

⁷⁴ Bennema, *Excavating*, p. 61.

People who encounter Jesus may either reject or accept him, and consequently remain part of the world below or enter the world above through a spiritual birth. The reality is that human responses to Jesus vary – they may be instant or gradual, positive or negative, consistent or haphazard, ambiguous or evident. Faced with this reality we must attempt to evaluate what John thinks would qualify someone for the new birth that brings a person into the realm of God, what kind of responses would bring and keep someone in a life-giving relationship with Jesus.⁷⁵

Having refuted the previous arguments for 20:22 being the ‘Johannine Pentecost’ or a symbolic gesture, I offer an alternative interpretation that fits the facts better. I suggest that John 20:22 describes Jesus’ breathing the Spirit on or into the disciples as an act of their re-creation. This event may be understood as the disciples’ birth of water-and-Spirit, described in John 3, which completes or secures their salvation. This does not mean that the disciples were not saved prior to 20:22. There is sufficient indication in the Gospel to suggest that the disciples were already in a saving or life-giving relationship with Jesus before the cross.⁷⁶

[commenting on John 6.37-40] ... the initiative for salvation lies with God, and then people are enabled to respond. Hence, it would be inappropriate to read into the text a doctrine of predestination.⁷⁷

[commenting on John 10.26-29] Jesus implies that if they were his sheep, they would have heard his voice, followed him and received eternal life. As it stands, however, they have not been ‘given’ to Jesus by the Father. This does not imply a doctrine of predestination.⁷⁸

We hesitate to include this section in the catalogue of grave errors provided so far in this article or alongside the ecumenical error noted in the section following. We enjoy fellowship with brethren who are not of a Reformed persuasion, and in no way would we wish to imply that we think their views are on a par with the destructive errors espoused by WEST’s Johannine specialist. While it is certainly true that we think Arminianism in its various forms is erroneous, what we are really objecting to here is WEST’s prominent claim to being a Reformed institution.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Bennema, “A Comprehensive Approach”, p. 55.

⁷⁶ Bennema, *Excavating*, pp. 216-217.

⁷⁷ Bennema, *Excavating*, p. 80.

⁷⁸ Bennema, *Excavating*, p.120.

⁷⁹ <http://www.webcitation.org/6NJ5jX1bR>

WEST: Another ecumenical connection

Another very serious matter concerns a collection of conference papers edited jointly by Bennema and a colleague.⁸⁰ The conference was organised by SAIACS, the South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies, under the title of the SAIACS Annual Consultation. According to Bennema and his colleague, the overall purpose of the consultation was “to stimulate, encourage and provide directions for academic, evangelical and missional thinking in South Asia. ... to promote and advance evangelical scholarship ... to be unique by aiming for excellence, holding together theory and practice within an evangelical framework”.⁸¹

In his own contribution to this conference,⁸² Bennema himself gives consideration to the question as to whether a person can be a Christian while still participating in Hindu or Muslim idolatry. His rejection of this possibility is again somewhat tentative; the clearest statement coming only in the editors’ introductory comment that “C. Bennema’s essay eventually denies the possibility of dual religious identities”.⁸³ However, other contributors vigorously uphold this possibility, including the Jesuit Professor Michael Amaladoss S.J., Director of the Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions of Loyola College, a Jesuit institution located in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India. Professor Amaladoss refers to a wide range of heretical sources and opinions, quoting, for example, the words of a Vatican II document which say that:

it will be in the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious traditions and by following the dictates of their own conscience that the members of other religions respond positively to God’s invitation and receive salvation in Jesus Christ, even while they do not recognize or acknowledge him as their Saviour.⁸⁴

Bennema and his colleague say that their intention is to:

⁸⁰ Bennema and Bhakiaraj, *Indian and Christian*.

⁸¹ Bennema and Bhakiaraj, “Introduction”, xi.

⁸² Bennema, “Early Christian Identity”.

⁸³ Bennema and Bhakiaraj, “Introduction”, xiv.

⁸⁴ Amaladoss, “Hindu and Christian”, p. 147.

inform the reader about the complexity and breadth of the debate. We then leave it to the reader to make up her or his mind. In line with what SAIACS stands for, participants are normally⁸⁵ evangelical in a broad sense but are not limited to a particular denomination, academic affiliation or country. Sometimes, however, an even broader participation, as is the case here, may be beneficial [or] even necessary to sharpen the thinking, stimulate wider dialogue and gain broader acceptance. While SAIACS does not necessarily endorse all views represented in this volume, it desires to promote dialogue and mature conversations across disciplines and religious traditions.⁸⁶

It hardly need be said that such an approach would not have been possible under the policy agreed in the now defunct FIEC Statement on Ecumenism. If a similar policy were in operation at WEST, Bennema's joining the faculty would also have been impossible. A previous article discusses other moves towards ecumenical receptiveness at WEST. We think the very serious nature of the departure it documents fully justifies its title.⁸⁷

The hypocrisy of English Nonconformity

In October 2009 a conference was held in Poland under the auspices of an organisation calling itself Together for the Gospel. We were not present at this conference, because several leading lights in Together for the Gospel are active participants in ecumenical and interfaith events.⁸⁸ The invited guest speaker for the conference was Paul Mallard.⁸⁹

In his first address, Mr Mallard made remarks which included the following:

[08:47] False teaching is like gangrene. Today we might say it is like a cancer. ... [09:29] Cancer of false teaching destroys the body of Christ. ... [11:45] I believe that the greatest foundation of the church is the Word of God. That is why the devil hates the Bible. The history of Satan's attack on the

⁸⁵ Normally? This was the *first* SAIACS Annual Consultation.

⁸⁶ Bennema and Bhakiaraj, "Introduction", xiv.

⁸⁷ Soper and Nicholson, *Wales Ecumenical School of Theology*.

⁸⁸ <http://www.kosciol.pl/article.php/20060112104352979> <http://strateias.org/id2.jpg>
<http://www.strateias.org/id.jpg> <http://strateias.org/MW3.jpg> <http://strateias.org/MW4.jpg>
<http://youtu.be/9as08uGVuz4>

⁸⁹ Mr Mallard currently serves as an [elder at Monyhull Church](#), Birmingham and as Director of Training and Development for the Midlands Gospel Partnership. From 2004-2007 he served as President of a group of churches which is a major backer of WEST. Monyhull Church is one of several supporters of the [Jacek Duda](#) featured in the first three links given in the previous footnote.

people of God has always been an attack on the foundation of Scripture. ... [14:29] we can never allow the Bible to move from its place as the foundation ...⁹⁰

In his second address, he said this:

[6:53] Guard the Gospel. That's in 2 Timothy chapter 1 verses 13 and 14. The Gospel is not something we can change. The Gospel has been given to us. We must pass it on, and we must guard it. Guarding is a picture of a battle. The devil will do everything he can to destroy the Gospel. Christian pastor, you are a soldier. You must fight for the Gospel.⁹¹

We wonder what Mr Mallard has in mind. What are the signs and symptoms of the cancer of false teaching? What is the appropriate therapy for this deadly malaise? In what ways has the enemy of souls attacked the foundation of Scripture in the past, and how is he doing this today? How should we fight to guard the Gospel? In what respects will our defence resemble a battle? What are the weapons of this warfare? Which tactics would be acceptable, and which unacceptable, in the defence of the Gospel? What personal risks should we be prepared to take? In guarding the Gospel, how far should we expose ourselves to criticism, ostracism or attack?

Mr Mallard was due to preach a sermon and lead a seminar at WEST on 6 February 2014.⁹² Whatever the tactics he adopted for the fight, it needs to be said unequivocally that Poland's Bible-believing Christians do not need the "help" of WEST,⁹³ WEST's graduates⁹⁴ or the organisations it supports.⁹⁵

13 March 2014

[What's going on at WEST? An archive of linked pages and documents](#)

⁹⁰ <http://vimeo.com/7336416>

⁹¹ <http://vimeo.com/7336444>

⁹² <http://www.webcitation.org/6O2aT0O94>

⁹³ Soper, "More Downgrade"; Soper and Nicholson, "Deepening Downgrade"; Soper and Nicholson, "Footnote to Downgrade"; Nicholson and Soper, "Continued FIEC Cooperation".

⁹⁴ Nicholson and Soper, *WEST's Shameful Contribution*; Nicholson and Soper, *WEST: Expanding the Boundaries*; Nicholson and Soper, *WEST: Still Not Coming Clean*.

⁹⁵ Nicholson, *WEST: Further Failure*.

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